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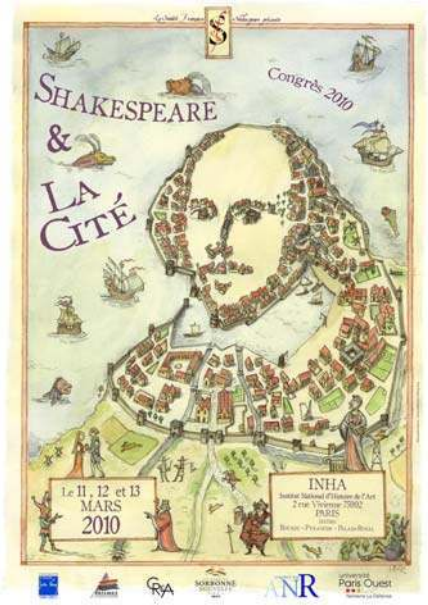

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‘O, ME ALONE!’: *CORIOLANUS* IN THE FACE OF COLLECTIVE OTHERNESS

Catherine LISAK

« Moi seul ». Coriolan ne cesse de revendiquer, dans le défi, son statut de personnage singulier, statut qui le distingue des citoyens de Rome, aussi bien dans ses actions, que dans le verbe, voire dans son identité même ; sa qualité d’aristocrate et son statut de militaire assoient sa différence et l’opposent fondamentalement aux roturiers de la cité. Pourtant, cette étude ne se polarisera pas sur la nature exceptionnelle du protagoniste. Notre sujet portera plutôt sur le statut théâtral et tragique des voix alternatives au héros représentées par une collectivité de personnages diverse et variée : les plébéiens, les tribuns, les soldats, les femmes de Rome ou leur ambassade, les citoyens volsques, les serviteurs d’Aufidus ou ses espions. Cette analyse mettra l’accent sur leur fonction chorique et cherchera à définir en termes dramatiques ce qui fait leur différence. Nous analyserons les rôles à la fois centraux et marginaux de cette collectivité de personnages qui habitent la dernière tragédie de Shakespeare, pour mieux apprécier les relations complexes que la pièce tisse avec le public, les voix multiples sur scène et l’action même de la tragédie.

‘O, me alone!’ Despite Coriolanus’s repeated and defiant claims to being singular and standing apart from the citizens of Rome, in action, speech, and identity, and despite his aristocratic and military sense of distinction, in opposition to the commoners that make up the city, this paper is not concerned with the quality of otherness or ‘exception’ in Coriolanus, the protagonist. My subject is the dramatic status of alternative voices represented by the multifarious collectivity – the plebeians, the tribunes, the soldiers, the women of Rome and their embassy, the Volscian citizens, Aufidius’s serving men, and the spies – with the purpose of measuring their choric function within the play and of defining the nature of their respective ‘otherness’ in tragic terms. By investigating the simultaneously central and liminal roles of the collectivity in Shakespeare’s last tragedy, I propose to come to grips with the intricate relations the play weaves between the audience, the collective voices on stage, and the action.

Shakespeare’s last tragedy, *Coriolanus*, challenges our traditional understanding of what ensures the sense of tragic unity in a play, leading us to reappraise the role played by the city’s community and examine the choric function of the collective others. In the main, the critical tendency has been to seat the unity of *Coriolanus* within the heroic figure and his singular sense of self, and quite justifiably so. In ‘Le moment historique de la tragédie en Grèce’, Jean-Pierre Vernant argues that it is the protagonist’s sense of ‘otherness’, based on his heroic ‘excess’, that progressively isolates him from the rest of the fictive community. The ‘otherness’ of the heroic code stands against those representative of collective otherness.

John Gould explains that this severance from the others in time and space makes the hero appear as a figure from another age, more or

less always estranged to the condition of the ordinary citizen.[1] The tragic hero thus belongs 'to an "absent" world, "separated" from the city'[2] and despite his actions being central to the drama, the only fitting place left for him to steer his course is elsewhere. This attic model of the heroic figure enhances our understanding of Shakespeare's last tragic protagonist as we measure the poignancy with which this intractable hero, having proved utterly impervious to the request of the collective others, defiantly looks towards yet greater displacement: 'Despising / For you the city, thus I turn my back. / There is a world elsewhere.' (III.iii.134-36).[3]

Critics regularly bring to our notice the many ways in which *Coriolanus* sets out to isolate its hero, even from his own sense of humanity, a process R.B. Parker describes as a 'dehumanizing process'.[4] Janette Dillon places the protagonist's isolation at the core of the play, by arguing that 'solitude', 'the essential structural element on which their tragedies are made to hinge', constitutes the 'common factor' between three of Shakespeare's characters — Coriolanus, Antony, and Timon.[5] Hibbard also seats the thrust of *Coriolanus* in 'the intense concentration on the figure of Coriolanus himself' and in 'his characteristic stance' — 'that of the solitary figure, the isolated individual, facing a hostile group of *other men*'.[6] Commenting on the play's repeated use of animal images, George R. Hibbard observes how these create 'an impression of [the protagonist's] difference from *other men* and of remoteness from them, which Plutarch calls his "solitariness"'.[7] Significantly, in both sentences, Hibbard throws the

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[1] Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Le moment historique de la tragédie classique en Grèce : quelques conditions sociales et psychologiques' in Jean-Pierre Vernant et Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris : La Découverte, 1986), p. 14: 'le personnage individualisé, dont l'action forme le centre du drame et qui a figure de héros d'un autre âge, [est] toujours plus ou moins étranger à la condition ordinaire du citoyen'.

[2] John Gould, 'Tragedy and the Collective Experience' in *Tragedy and the Tragic, Greek Tragedy and Beyond*, ed. M.S. Silk (Clarendon: O.U.P., 1996), p. 219.

[3] The edition I have used throughout the essay is Robert B. Parker's edition, 'The Oxford Shakespeare' (Oxford: O.U.P., 1994).

[4] R.B. Parker, *op.cit.,* p. 45.

[5] Janette Dillon, '"Solitariness": Shakespeare and Plutarch', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 78 (1979), p. 344.

[6] William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. George Richard Hibbard, 'The New Penguin Shakespeare' (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 8. The italics are mine.

[7] Hibbard, *op.cit.,* p. 31-2. The italics are mine.

emphasis firmly on Coriolanus's singularity and solitariness by using the phrase 'other men'.

The use of the word 'other' deserves a moment's pause. In itself, the word may function either in a dissociative way — thus expressing alterity, diversity, exclusivity, or keeping the audience and the stage at a distance — or in an associative way, in which case it denotes addition, reciprocity or inclusion, as in the compound words 'each other' or 'all others'. In *Coriolanus*, 'other' — including 'other's', 'others' and 'otherwise' — occurs 41 times, that is, more often than in any other of Shakespeare's plays.[8] If anything, these occurrences reveal that the play undergoes a central exploration of the sense or state of otherness, not exclusively at the level of the unyielding heroic temper — a notion Bernard Knox examined in his study of Sophoclean tragedy[9] — but as an attribute or experience integral to all those that Coriolanus relegates to a position of liminality, a position in the city which they occupy so fully that the assembly of others passes from being an aggregate of marginal agents to a central, 'incantatory'[10] force participating in the dynamics of the tragedy — be it Volumnia's spell-binding lines that prepare the whole city for Martius's victorious return (II.i.154-57) or 'the voice of slaves' that 'whooped' Coriolanus 'out of Rome' (IV.5.77-78).

Harley Granville Barker considers that 'everything' in the play 'centres upon Rome'. He sees the city in *Coriolanus* as 'the play's one sounding board' harbouring 'the springs of the action' and concludes that our attention is subsequently made to shift to that point where 'Coriolanus himself sinks at last by comparison to something like second place'.[11] There is, indeed, a dramatic thrust in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* that rhythmically draws people's focus — the characters of the play as well as the audience — away from the hero and their heightened awareness of his charismatic, essential, singular otherness,

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8 There are 29 occurrences of 'other'; 2 of 'other's'; 10 of 'others'; and one occurrence of 'otherwise'.

9 *Bernard M. W. Knox, The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, *1964).*

10 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Brockbank, 'The Arden Shakespeare' 2nd series, (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 45. Brockbank applies the word to the tribunes' manipulation of people power. Parker, *op.cit*, p.71, talks of Volumnia's 'eerily incantatory lines' (II.i.154-57).

11 Harley Granville Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. 3, *Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus* (London: Batsford, 1963), p. 111.

and towards those other characters that make up the fictitious community — towards collective otherness, in a way that ensures the civic frame of the tragedy itself. This is not to suggest, as Bertolt Brecht contended, that Shakespeare's play is the tragedy of a city at war with its hero, a 'tragedy in which the people matter first and foremost',[12] any more than I would suggest that the gist of the play boils down to Sicinius's outburst: 'What is the city but the people?' (III.i.197).

The displacement of focus occurs at a dramatic and aesthetic level and concerns the exchange or sharing of roles, identities, and functions; its purpose, I will argue, is either to exacerbate or to resolve the every-changing tensions between the protagonist and all the other characters in the play. By what dramatic strategies, for instance, can a play make its fictitious city steal the show from the tragic protagonist? What are the dramatic mechanisms in Shakespeare's final tragedy that trigger an experience of displacement and repulsion between all characters — all of whom are made, at some point in the play, to act out their own alternative liminality, in a way that makes them the centre of our attention? Moreover, how does the play turn otherness into a common and, at times, communal experience?

Such queries beg the question: 'What is a Citie?' — a question put to us again and again in the play; a question the first English translation of Aristotle's *Politics* also put to its readership in 1598, in the title to Book I, Chapter II. The treatise offers several answers, amongst which: 'A Citie is a perfect and absolute assembly or communion of many townes or streets in one, hauing already attained to the highest pitch of perfection and selfe-sufficiencie'.[13] Far from playing singularity against the multitude, or the exceptional individual (what one might term 'the other') against the common crowd ('the others'), Aristotle's definition secures a 'communion' between the many and the one. In fact, his sense of communion is more subtle still. In Book II, Chapter I, the emphasis rests on a shared state of

[12] Richard Marienstras saw the limitations to such an approach to the play in an essay entitled 'Autour de Coriolan' in *Le poète et la cité, de Platon à Shakespeare*, textes rassemblés par Dominique Goy-Blanquet, coll. In'hui 59 (Brussels: Le Cri, 2003), p. 110-111: 'Brecht a résumé ainsi sa conception de Coriolan: "la tragédie d'une ville qui a contre elle un héros". Certes c'est une idée intéressante et instructive mais très latérale par rapport à la pièce. […] Selon sa version et dans son esprit, c'est le peuple, le peuple d'abord, qui est important dans cette pièce. Shakespeare a une conception bien plus subtile de la chose.'

[13] *Aristotles politiques, or Discourse of gouernment*. Translated out of French into English (1598), p. 12.

'otherness', to be understood both as a state of unity or oneness — 'a Citty or Common-weale should bee one' — that embraces diversity, that is, the quality of otherness or the dissimilarity constitutive of each man: 'for a City or a Common-weale is not onely founded of many men, but also of such as differ in kind, and are not alike to each other'.[14]

'Otherness' may seem to be a quality and state to which the hero lays claim and the others are relegated; yet as the play reveals, the versatility and rich complexity of 'otherness' makes it as much the prerogative of the many as that of the one. 'Collective otherness' will thus include all those characters in the play's fictitious city that 'differ in kind' and 'are not alike to each other' though they share in the function of ensuring tragic unity through a communion of voices — a communion that in no way dissipates their characteristic diversity or 'otherness'.

Aufidius teaches us that all forms of 'thought' in the fictitious world of the play is 'brought to bodily act' (I.ii.4-5). 'Otherness' is an abstract word that never finds its way in Shakespeare's plays, though the concept, far from being anachronistic, had recently entered to the literary and theological vocabulary of early Jacobean times. A closer look at the theological meanings assigned to the idea of otherness in early seventeenth-century intellectual circles will reveal that these debates had their impact on the play's varied representations of the community; also, they will open up possibilities for more complex interpretations of the state of 'otherness' that do not simply infer a sense of absolute alterity; quite the contrary. Similarly, despite the absence of a chorus in *Coriolanus*, as it appears in *Henry V*, and, indeed, the absence of all mention of a chorus in Aristotle's definition of tragedy,[15] this study will show that *Coriolanus* displays a full array of collective 'otherness', embodied by a set of characters or group of 'others', or by a single character, the individual 'other' — all of whom take turns in speaking for the collectivity in a choric mode.

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[14] Aristotle, *op. cit.,* p. 64.

[15] Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (London: Duckworth, 1987), p. 250: 'The fundamental premises of Aristotle's theory of poetry and tragedy virtually dictate the devaluation and neglect of choral lyric'.

In asking what proper place, if any, there may be for a chorus in *Coriolanus*,[16] I undertake a study of the *topography* of the choric group, starting with the citizens of Rome. By *topography*, I do not so much mean the geographical loci as the rhetorical, social, and ritual grounding of choric 'otherness'. This implied revision of the very identity of the choric persona in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* admits, from the outset, John Gould's influential reappraisal of the chorus's 'social and ritual rooting'[17] in Greek tragedy — a reassessment that has been described as representing 'not just a retreat from Grand Theory, but rather a comment on the *experimental* nature of tragedy'.[18] The investigation will reveal that collective otherness is not simply an alternative quality or state of being to that of the protagonist, but it is also an elusive one. Its elusiveness resides in the shift in choric roles and identities from one group of characters to the next. Such structural shifts in characterization result from displacement (that of the characters' and audience's focus) and dislocation (that is, the disruption of an established order), both of which have a radical impact on the modeling of the choral persona. These multiple fictive constructions depart from the received idea that the chorus must always be played by a defined set of characters. Thus we observe how the choric function can be assumed by single characters, Volumnia, Menenius, Cominius, Aufidius, and indeed, by the hero himself, in a way that secures not only a sense of pace in the play but also a communal, cathartic sense of otherness between the audience, the stage and the characters.

I

By adamantly refusing to 'idly sit / To hear my nothings monstered' (II.ii.73-74), Coriolanus perhaps unwittingly gives the Commander-in-chief of the Roman army his cue with his awkward exit. In an effort to save the day, and earn Coriolanus his consulship, Cominius steps in as Coriolanus steps out. The moment feels highly orchestrated — a piece

[16] Simon Goldhill, in 'The Authority of the Tragic Chorus' in *Tragedy and the Tragic*, p. 246, reminds us that 'choruses typically have a special relationship to the place of the action'.
[17] Gould, *op.cit.*, p. 226.
[18] Goldhill, *op.cit.*, p. 247.

of 'the self-conscious theatre of personal identity and political design', which Brockbank identifies in Act III, scene ii.[19] The Consul begins his hyperbolic tribute with a formal understatement for emphasis: 'I shall lack voice' (II.ii.80). His anxiety about being lost for words is no sooner shared than dispelled. In fact, Cominius's litotes is as deliberate as Coriolanus's outburst is self-conscious. Both utterances emphasize heroic excess, as we pass from Coriolanus's overstated embarrassment to Cominius's encomium. The effect is well-rehearsed double act that plays singularity against the multitude, and emphasizes Coriolanus's segregation from the community: Coriolanus wilfully cuts himself off from the others, by temporarily withdrawing from the chamber and stage, while Cominius justifies Coriolanus's fundamental divorce from mankind.

Any misgivings that might have left Cominius tongue-tied have proved purely rhetorical. This exercise in rhetoric serves a political purpose as it downplays any threat of external compulsion or outside interference that he might seem to exert over the decision-makers, the 'Masters of the people' (II.ii.49&75), a title that includes the Senators and the Tribunes. Yet, the consul's speech, spoken to win men's votes, also comes across as a provocative piece, for within a few, sweeping statements, this spectacular character profile of Martius exalts an insuperable barrier (note the use of the modal 'cannot') that sets 'the man' apart from the 'others' by typecasting Coriolanus as a 'man' like no 'other':

> The man I speak of *cannot in the world*
> Be singly counterpoised. At sixteen years,
> When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought
> *Beyond the mark of others.* (II.ii.84-87)[20]

In some respects, the last line 'Beyond the mark of others' comes close to echoing certain phrases that appear in the very first pages of *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*. North's Plutarch reveals how 'orphanage [...] doth not hinder him [...] to excel *above the common sorte*' and how 'in those days, valliantness was honoured in ROME *above all other vertues'*.[21] Whereas Plutarch continues to measure the hero and his

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[19] Brockbank, *op.cit.*, p.57.

[20] The italics are mine.

[21] The italics are mine. I am quoting from *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes translated by Sir Thomas North* (Stratford-upon-Avon: The Shakespeare Head

virtue according to a hierarchy of men and human virtues, Cominius makes Coriolanus into the living essence of valour, as he shares his conviction that 'valour is the whole of virtue'[22] while the full house of Senators, tribunes and spectators are relegated to the station of some anonymous throng ('others') that swell the common ranks of men.

There is a derogatory slant in 'other(s)' that does not apply to the concept of 'otherness'. This abstract word first appears in the English language with Sir Philip Sidney's 1598 translation of the French protestant Philippe de Mornay's theological apology of *The trewnesse of Christian religion* — a translation completed by Arthur Golding on his request. 'Othernesse' is coined in order to translate Mornay's term, 'diversité', as opposed to 'identité', the identical, or unicity, which Sidney translates as 'selfesamenesse'. In Chapter 6, entitled 'That the Philosophie of olde time agreed to the doctrine of the Trinitie', it is argued that 'selfesamenesse' (the unity of the deity — also referred to in the French text as 'coessentiel') is the sole attribute of God. On the contrary, 'othernesse' refers to infinite embodiments of that essence through each human being:

> *the Mynder, the Mynding and the Mynded, are in the Godhead all one thing ;* [...] Now, he that myndeth himself, hath not a seuerall being from that thing which he myndeth, but being both in one, he beholdeth himself in himself, and so becommeth two parties, which yet notwithstanding be both but one thing still. [...] For the beholding of ones selfe in his selfe, is nothing but himselfe : But yet must there needes be alwaies both a selfesamenesse and also an othernesse. *Now then, let vs conclude thus; that these two Inbeings or Persons, namely,* The Mynded and the Mynder, *are both one thing; and therefore that they differ not but only in way of relation : And that foreasmuch as there must néedes bee euer both a selfesamenesse and also an othernesse,* (If I may so terme them) the selfesamenesse is in the Essence or beeing, because that from God there procéedeth nothing but God ; and the othernesse is in the Inbeings or Persons, as in respect that the one is the begetter and the other is the begotten.[23]

Press and Oxford: Blackwell, 1928), vol. II, p. 172. Plutarch pursues his definition of 'valliantness' thus: 'which they called *Virtus*, by the name of vertue selfe, as including in that generall name, all other speciall vertues besides. So that *Virtus* in the Latin, was asmuche as valliantnes'.

[22] Brockbank, *op.cit.*, p. 41 on Coriolanus's speech (III.i.121-4).

[23] Philippe de Mornay, A vvoorke concerning the trewnesse of the Christian religion, written in French [...] Begunne to be translated into English by Sir Philip Sidney Knight, and at his request finished by Arthur Golding (1587), p. 86-87. In the original French text, De la verite de la religion chrestienne, (Iacob Stoer, 1590), chapitre 6, p. 65-66, this section is entitled 'Identité & diuersité', which translates as 'selfesammenesse and othernesse'. The

According to Mornay's argument, 'otherness' is that which constitutes our individuality. It is at work in each and every one of us. Because all men share in this distinction, it is also what characterizes our very nature as human beings. The concept is opposed to 'selfesamenesse', which suggests a state not of individuality but of singularity, where the 'begetter' and the 'begotten' are but one and the same, the begetter *being* self-begotten. 'Selfesamenesse' transcends mere character-traits like unyieldingness, self-sufficiency, wholesomeness, completeness, or absolute integrity, all of which have been attributed to Shakespeare's Coriolanus. The theological concept leans towards self-deification, something Coriolanus may indeed be found guilty of,[24] as he strives to disown his mortal state, through a tendency, Aufidius remarks, 'Not to be other than one thing' (IV.vii.41-42).

This is a reputation Coriolanus has earned by surviving his many encounters with death and Cominius takes part in constructing this image of the man. The commander-in-chief is well placed to understand the way the Volscians perceive Coriolanus, now that he has returned to lead them against Rome: 'He is their god. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better' (IV.vi.93-95). As he explains to the tribunes, no longer with deference and in self-deprecation but with irony and sarcasm, Coriolanus behaves like a 'thing' *causa sui* because that is how he is perceived and expected to act: 'Who is't can blame him? / Your enemies and his find something in him.' (IV.vi.111-12). All share in this collective fantasy of the hero's deity which is no longer simply an image of his own making. As Rome has disinherited him, through banishment, so he disinherits himself from mankind.

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original passage reads: 'car l'intelligent & l'intelligible ne sont qu'un : car ce regard de soy mesmes, en soy-mesmes, n'est autre chose que soy-mesmes : mais il faut toutefois qu'il y ait & su mesme & de la diuersité. Concluons maintenant : Ce sont deux subsistences un Vn : l'vne intelligible & l'autre intelligente ou intellect. Elles ne different donc que de relation. Et derechef : Il faut qu'il y ait identité, s'il se peut dire, & diuersité. S'ensuie donc que l'identité soit en l'essence, car de Dieu ne procede rien qui nesoit Dieu : la diuersité és subsistences, parce qu'autre est l'engendrant, & autre l'engendré'.

[24] Coriolanus shares this attribute with another Plutarchean, Shakespearean and Drydenian character, Cleopatra, as Derek Hughes argues, in '*Aphrodite katadyomene*: Dryden's Cleopatra on the Cydnos', *Comparative Drama* 14 (1980), p. 35-45.

It may be argued that if the sense of belonging is both a matter of choice and destiny, because it is a natural emotion,[25] Coriolanus's sense of uniqueness has equally, intrinsically, become a matter of choice and destiny, because it is what the collectivity naturally, that is, implicitly, expects of him. By the end of the play, he reaches a juncture whereby to disown the image of his disposition will cost him his life. Not to do so would be to go against his nature. The inevitability of his final tragic scene does not make it any the less 'unnatural' (v.iii.185). As Northrop Frye remarks, in a study on the ambivalence of tragedy: 'The mood of tragedy preserves our ambiguous and paradoxical feeling about death; it is inevitable and always happens, and yet, when it does happen, it carries with it some sense of the unnatural and premature.'[26]

Coriolanus is aware that to survive this reputation and the expectations that go with it, he must keep up appearances. Thus he strives to fend off all surge of emotion when met by the most intimate of embassies, his mother, wife and young son, by displaying a humour of 'selfesamenesse'. The metatheatrical and theological connotations of the word 'author' suggest an implicit leap in meaning between the 'one who begets; a father, an ancestor' (*OED*, 2.a) and 'The Creator' (*OED*, 1.c):

> I'll never
> Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
> As if a man were author of himself
> And knew no other kin. (v.iii.36-37).

R. B. Parker interprets Coriolanus's use of the conditional as the admittance of the 'impossibility' of such self-begettal and contrasts Martius's use of the conditional 'As if' with Richard of Gloucester's assertive 'I am myself alone' (*3 Henry VI*, v.vi.84)'.[27] Yet even before admitting defeat, the phrasal conjunction 'as if' emphasizes, and therefore recognizes, the difference that lies between the self and the fiction of the self. Coriolanus, who is caught up in yet another survival

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[25] Richard Marienstras, Notice et Notes sur *Coriolan*, in *Shakespeare, Tragédies* (*Œuvres complètes, II*), ed. Jean-Michel Déprats, Gisèle Venet (Paris : Gallimard « Pléiade », 2002), p. 1559: 'l'appartenance est à la fois un choix et un destin'.

[26] Northrop Frye, *Fools of time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 3.

[27] Parker, *op.cit.,* note 36, p. 333-334.

game, finally becomes aware of the strategic gap that separates what *seems* and what *is*. Something his mother had sought to make him understand in Act III, scene ii. He strives to maintain a visible posture of defiance that mimics 'selfesamenesse', a posture that the characters, and the audience, consider to be part and parcel of the man; yet this is proving, as he himself admits, most out of character, most 'unnatural' (V.iii.185), because to stand for what he *represents* would be to go against what he *is*. This is a character for whom *being* could never give in to *seeming*. He opposed his mother on this very point: 'I play / The man I am' (III.ii.15-16). Volumnia had then argued: 'You might have been enough the man you are / With striving less to be so.' (III.ii.19-20). A lesson Coriolanus seems to have learnt as he abandons his authoritative stance and surrenders to the collective vision of his mother, wife, and child, and to the supplications not to destroy Rome, his birthplace — all mirrors of his otherness.

The trappings of tragedy have caught up with Coriolanus. The ultimate paradox of the play, Richard Marienstras argues, is that Coriolanus is made to play the role of a traitor at that point in the play when he desperately strives to behave according to Nature and in keeping with his nature.[28] In perhaps one of the finest readings of this tragic scene, he explains that what would be ultimately most unnatural would be not to give in to a natural emotion — the sense of national identity:

> Les citoyens sont tous lies par une émotion *naturelle*. Leurs inimitiés passagères n'iront jamais jusqu'à remettre radicalement en cause le grand pacte social qui les lie entre eux et à la chose publique. La décision de Coriolan de ne pas brûler Rome, de l'épargner au risque de sa propre vie, illustre rétrospectivement la force de l'incorporation évoquée au premier acte et l'inscription symbolique de la cité dans la Nature. Si Coriolan renonce à sa vengeance et consent à épargner la Ville, ce n'est pas parce qu'il est fils obéissant – ou trop obéissant – de sa mère. C'est parce qu'il cède, comme il le dit, à la voix de la nature […]. Malgré les apparences, malgré l'arrogance du guerrier préoccupé de carnage, c'est encore Rome qui est le fondement de l'être et de la nature de celui-ci.[29]

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[28] Marienstras, *op.cit.*, p. 1566: 'Le grand paradoxe de cette tragédie est que le seul homme foncièrement fidèle parmi les patriciens est celui qui jouera le rôle d'un traître à son pays […] – au moment où Coriolan tentait désespérément d'agir conformément à la Nature et à sa nature.'

[29] Marienstras, *op.cit.*, p. 1560 & 1564.

Coriolanus is not a tragic hero simply because his intrinsic *aporia* means he is destined to die. His character is also tragic because it is made to incorporate and act out the antagonisms between two nations that paradoxically, constitute the natural grounding of civic unity: 'L'opposition entre les Romains et les Volsques, enfin, joue un rôle politique considérable [...] puisqu'elle est fondatrice d'unité dans une Rome désunie'.[30] Northrop Frye might argue that in his ultimate death lies 'the essential event that gives shape and form to life'.[31] Nowhere in the play has Coriolanus come closer to matching his mother than in this function: 'O my mother, mother, O!' (V.iii.186). Coriolanus's exclamation juxtaposes his inherent sense of belonging ('my') to his powerful sense of uniqueness. The line is framed by the all-encompassing yet empty-shelled 'O' of a character who, according to Cominius, 'struck / Corioles like a planet' (II.ii.111-12), as his Volscian counterparts would agree, as they desperately attempt to save him from the mob: 'The man is noble, and his fame folds in / This orb o'th'earth' (V.vi.124-25). The chiasmic and alliterative structure of Coriolanus's line also intimates a near-to-perfect equation between mother and son: he is after all the 'other' in 'mother'; and she, to Coriolanus, is 'my' other.

The prototypal Volumnia succeeds in frustrating all attempts at parental severance to the bitter end. In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Plutarch's orphaned hero remains his mother's son throughout. In a line that revisits the meaning of incorporate otherness, Volumnia relates the 'quality of being other' to m*other*hood: 'Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'st it from me' (III.ii.131). The line uncovers the premises of what will become the protagonist's inability to differentiate between opposing forms of 'otherness' within the community — social alterity and civic estrangement. Thus we learn that in infancy, Martius was already a force of nature drawing and hoarding vital provisions — 'valiantness', like the corn his city depends on, to be stocked rather than shared. Volumnia's reminder turns Martius's otherness into likeness by recalling his heritage and by providing his exceptional nature with a provenance. His attempted disseverance from mankind could be better described as the assimilation of an*other*'s condition at the expense of the begetter: 'To suck' is defined at *OED*, 2 as 'to imbibe

[30] Marienstras, *op.cit.*, p. 1557.
[31] Frye, *op.cit.*, p. 3

[qualities] with the mother's milk', though this absorbance of substance also supposes deprivation; Volumnia, indeed, complains her son drew valour from her to the last drop.

Volumnia offers another perspective to Coriolanus's valiancy, which according to Cominius has made him into an unmatchable entity, a figure of otherness because 'something that is other' (*OED*, b). She reminds him that she has acted as an organic provider of that condition, being herself the very source of a kind. If anything, it is he who shares in her state of otherness. However distinct the being, the quality of otherness is inherited and passed on. She will not hesitate to interpret Sicinius's line at its most basic, biological level, 'Are you mankind?', spontaneously voicing her sense of belonging to the human race: 'Ay, fool. Is that a shame?' (IV.ii.18-19). Yet by reminding Coriolanus that otherness remains a transmitted rather than spontaneous state, Volumnia is only stating the truth of the mean. As Vernant explains: 'le chœur exprime à sa façon, au héros atteint de démesure, la vérité collective, la vérité moyenne, la vérité de la cité'.[32] If the first citizen makes Martius out to be a mother's boy in battle-service — 'he did it to please his mother' (I.i.35-6), the truth Coriolanus ultimately surrenders to, before his death, is his intrinsic relation to Rome: it is not Volumnia, but Rome that makes and unmakes, but also shouts and 'unshouts', the hero (out) of the city-state; and it is in his death that the city's integrity rests. Volumnia's pleading gives voice to that verity, which was expressed from the outset by the citizens (I.i.10-12). Her speech, which has an impact on both the hero and the collective community, ensures a sense of communion, as the messenger reports: 'Good news, good news. The ladies have prevailed.' (V.iv. 40). The reveling community of 'shouting Romans' — 'The trumpets, sackbuts, psalteries, an fifes, / Tabors and cymbals' (V.iv.49-50) — mark her ability to occupy the city, in spirit, so fully that all the agents of the play, from the most central to the most marginal, partake in the dynamics of the moment. In Menenius's words: 'This Volumnia / Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full; of tribunes such as you, / A sea and land full.' (V.iv.52-55). Philip Brockbank perceives Volumnia as 'a processional symbol of "the life of Rome" (V.v.1) while Richard Marienstras considers the character most memorable as a symbolic figure, *a city voice*:

[32] Vernant, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p. 159.

> Shakespeare a réussi l'exploit d'en faire un personnage complexe et nuancé en même temps qu'une 'voix-de-ville' — l'expression vivante des élans, des vertus, des inhumains règlements et dérèglements de Rome. Sans que l'on puisse jamais oublier la femme, la veuve et la mère, elle personnifie les exigences communales et éthiques de Rome dans tous leurs excès, avec une force et une intransigeance inoubliables, à tel point que les ruses qu'elle conseille à son fils d'employer contre la plèbe apparaissent comme les formes politiques d'une volonté inflexible. On retiendra d'ailleurs la scène où Volumnia reproche à Coriolan de ne pas vouloir user de ruses en politique alors qu'il en utilise bien à la guerre. Et il convient de garder à l'esprit que ses exigences concernent d'abord Rome, ensuite sa classe et enfin Coriolan. Malgré les apparences, malgré l'arrogance du guerrier préoccupé de carnage, c'est encore Rome qui est le fondement de l'être et de la nature de celui-ci.[33]

Menenius will also attempt to take on this choric function, when he visits the Volscian camp, by speaking of the common predicament of plebeians and patricians alike, thus putting his understanding of human affinities to practical use. After all, 'You know the very road into his kindness', so Brutus tells him (V.i.59). As Simon Goldhill explains, 'since the performance of tragedy is assimilated to the scenario of the *sophos*, 'the wise man', 'figure of authority', speaking to the *polis*, it is hard not to see the chorus of tragedy drawing on such an educational tradition'.[34] He pleads for the forgiveness of Rome's 'petitionary countrymen' and begs Coriolanus to maintain the state of Rome whole. He plays the mediator 'between the apprehensive humanity of the people and the inhibited humanity of Coriolanus'.[35] But his abortive attempt is a counter-example to Volumnia's success. It only stresses a shift in dynamics, as the play no longer grants the old demagogue the ability to sway collective otherness, but leaves Menenius to play the meagre role that he ironically repudiates: 'a jack guardant' (V.ii.61).

A character's dramatic status may vary in the play, and a single character may become a choric persona or merge with a set of other characters who themselves embody a collective voice. This is one way in which the 'other', with all its sense of uniqueness, shifts towards the state of collective otherness. Additionally, 'otherness' also supposes an outside gaze; the 'other' playing not only the spectator's role but also the choric role of the witness. As Granville Barker argues: 'Coriolanus

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33 Marienstras, *op.cit.*, p. 1564.
34 Goldhill, *op.cit.,* 251.
35 Brockbank, *op.cit.,* p.53.

[...] is a character not inwardly evolved [...] but seen from without'.[36] Drawing from this comment, I would suggest that the play entrusts the construction not only of the tragic hero but of the play's unicity as a whole to an outside gaze, a witness's account, a testimony or running commentary that takes on a choric function. It is from this outward stance that I will now pursue this analysis of the staging of collective otherness in *Coriolanus*.

II

The opening scene of the play begins with the stage direction '*Enter a company of mutinous Citizens with staves, clubs, and other weapons*' (I.i.0.SD). A first exchange takes place between two individualised citizens. Both are assigned the numbered speech prefixes 'FIRST CITIZEN' and 'SECOND CITIZEN', whilst the rest of the company is referred to as 'ALL'. As a speech prefix, 'ALL' often indicates a possible choric presence, though this in itself is not evidence enough that we are dealing with a chorus. For instance, it is not clear to what extent the farewell line: 'The gods preserve you both', spoken to the Tribunes by 'ALL THE CITIZENS' (IV.vi.22), may qualify as a choric utterance. In order to identify and situate the choric function in *Coriolanus*, we need to consider each time not only who pronounces the lines, but also how these lines are spoken.

Several rhetorical elements contribute to turning the group of citizens at the beginning of Act I, scene i, into a choric group. The first and second citizens, who speak in turn, punctually incite the rest of the company to join in the debate on the hero and their current situation in the city. 'ALL' responds by speaking in synchronisation and in ripple. To the first citizen's request, 'hear me speak' (I.i.1-2), and to his questions: 'You are all resolved...?' (I.i.4) and 'First, you know...?' (I.i.7), the answers are delivered in unison: 'Speak, speak' (I.i.3), 'Resolved, resolved' (I.i.6), and 'We know't, we know't' (I.i.9). 'ALL' takes its cue from the main verbs that command the first citizen's lines. These verbs are emphatically repeated. Such ritualised echoes may be identified as choric utterances both because they are spoken in acknowledgement of a single citizen's statement and because they

[36] Harley Granville Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

function like a burden and are manifest of a symbiotic, communal relationship.[37]

These ripples in speech may take a more subtle and elaborate turn. The fourth and fifth lines, for instance, which most editors assign to the speech prefix 'ALL',[38] differ from the initial choric utterances inasmuch as their structures extend beyond the plain, literal repetitions of an idea they did not themselves initiate. Isolated repetitions continue to scan the lines, as when they pick up on an outburst of command — 'Let' (I.i.10 & 12) — or of outrage — 'Against' (I.i.26). Yet their linguistic pattern seems more personalized. In a transport of emotion and a display or ardent zeal, the lines begin to echo, not another's words, but their own spontaneous outbursts, especially words of impetus, and an encouragement to act, such as the adverb 'Away, away' (I.i.12). They also become the initiators of a theme or imagery that will from thereon ripple through the play, such as the theme of action over words — 'No more talking on't, let it be done' (I.i.12) — or animal imagery: 'He's a very dog to the commonalty' (I.i.26).

E. A. J. Honigmann establishes a distinction between the first three utterances, which, he considers, play 'an obvious choric or ritual function', and the following two utterances, which 'are individualised, not ritualistic, and always sound wrong in the theatre if uttered by more than a single voice'.[39] This may not necessarily be the case; for the lines still remain ritualised in the way they manage repetition. Also, their being segmented into two parts or sentences — 'No more talking on't, let it be done'; and 'Against him first. He's a very dog to the commonalty' —, enables at least two different voices to pronounce them; indeed, some aspects to the lines would come across better if

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[37] Brockbank, *op.cit.*, p. 71, studies the play's use of metaphors that function in a similar fashion: 'the distinctive imaginative effects of the play's language are articulatory and echoic, not figurative.'

[38] See Michael Warren, 'Perception of error and the opening of "Coriolanus" ' in *Textual Performances. The Modern Reproduction of Shakespeare's Drama*, ed. Lukas Erne and Margaret Jane Kidnie (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2004), p. 128: '"Against him first. . . Commonalty", is retained for "All" by Philip Brockbank (Arden, 1976), David Bevington (HarperCollins, 1992), R.B. Parker (Oxford, 1994), John F. Andrews (Everyman, 1998), Jonathan Crewe (Pelican, 1999), and Lee Bliss (New Cambridge, 2000); it is given to the First Citizen by George Hibbard (New Penguin, 1967) and G.Blackmore Evans and J.J. Tobin (Riverside, 2nd edition 1997) ; the *Oxford Complete Works* (1986) divides it into two parts, assigning them to Third and Fourth Citizen respectively'.

[39] E.A.J. Honigmann, 'Re-enter the Stage Direction: Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries', *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976), p. 121.

several voices joined in, as in moments of repetition and synchronisation, i.e. 'Away, away'. If such short sentences can only be aligned on the printed page, they need not be pronounced on stage in linear fashion. 'ALL', after all, suggests a crowd, so that the general effect of simultaneity, disorder and even noise need not be shunned, especially if we take into account all that has been written on the topical allusion of this first stage direction to London's food riots of the 1590s and the contemporary Midlands rural anti-enclosure riots of 1607.

Despite such considerations, it cannot be dismissed that a crowd may behave like a chorus or serve a choric function. One recalls how Granville Barker warned 'the unwary producer' not to 'be led [...] into projecting a scene of mere quick confusion, violence and high-pitched noise' simply because the stage direction indicated described the citizens '*with staves, clubs, and other weapons*' (I.i.0.SD). The citizens, he argued, formed 'a collective character',[40] a phrase that implicitly establishes a direct comparison between Shakespeare's final tragedy and ancient Greek drama.[41] In fact, it points to Vernant's grasp of the ancient Greek chorus as the collective on stage, which, they argued, represented the collective of the audience. In a reappraisal of this model of the chorus, Oddone Longo argues that 'the essence of the chorus, the essential and distinctive feature of Attic drama, must be recognized in its role as "representatives of the collective citizen-body"'.[42] However tempting it might be to apply this analysis of the choric function to the Roman citizens in *Coriolanus*, because it presents an easy pathway for a comparison between Shakespeare's Jacobean tragedy and fifth century Attic drama, the leap should be made guardedly, for risk of erasing the greater complexities involved in understanding any choric structure, as Vernant's study reveals and as will transpire in this examination of the shape and topography of the choric function in the opening scene of *Coriolanus*.

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[40] Granville Barker, *op. cit*, p. 152.

[41] Granville Barker had produced ancient Greek drama on the professional English and American stage. See Noel K. Thomas, 'Harley Granville-Barker and the Greek Drama', Educational Theatre Journal 7:4 (December 1955), p. 294-300.

[42] Oddone Longo, 'The Theater of the *Polis*', p. 17, in *Nothing to do with Dionysius? Athenian Drama in its Social context*, ed. J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), quoted in John Gould, *op.cit.,* p. 219.

Both the opening stage direction and the ensuing lines pit order against disorder, structure against chaos: the ambivalence resides within the choice of words and the action. The impression of disorder created by the citizens entering '*with staves, clubs, and weapons*' is quickly dispelled as they are halted in their stride. There follows a set of legal phrases, and to begin with: 'Before we proceed any further, hear me speak' (I.i.1). However, there is much more to the verb 'proceed' than the meaning 'to carry on a legal action or process' (*OED*, 'proceed', 2.d). The basic choreographic effect produced by the citizens' processional entrance with tools for weapons — see the Latin derivative, *processio*, from the verb *procedere*, 'to proceed' — creates a moment of stress. Yet 'proceed' also supposes method in conduct or behaviour, very much in the way of a choric 'dance', which, understood in the Greek sense, refers to any ordered physical movement.

This effect is increased by the repetition of 'resolved', a verb that suggests that they have reached a formal resolution by way of a deliberative, collective body. Furthermore, the body of men are led by the first citizen, their (self)-appointed mouthpiece, who acts the part of a *chorypheus* — hear, κορυφή, *koryphḗ*, the top of the head—, that is, the leader of a chorus in ancient Greek tragedy. He initiates a dialogue on a critical mode that seems to parody the Greek *parodos,* an opening ode that celebrated a heroic character. Yet as he begins to speak, the chief leader of the '*company*' severely censures Caius Martius as the 'chief enemy to the people' (I.i.7-8) — thus turning the traditional celebration of a hero on its head.

The stage direction also contains the phrase '*a company of mutinous Citizens'*, which similarly plays on the ambivalence between the embodiment of an organised, combined force of civic men and generalised army in disaffection and revolt. In '*Coriolanus* and the city', Peter Holland pays particular attention to the complexity of meaning contained in the opening stage direction (which was possibly Shakespeare's, and possibly Ralph Crane's) and redefines each word. Thus he explains:

> 'Mutinous' points to their physical movement on stage as well as their purpose in their actions: the Oxford English Dictionary indicates an early modern sense of 'turbulent, contentious' (1.b) as well as 'rebellious' (1) suggesting that both the movement of the crowd and their attack on a correct and approved social order may be the point here. 'Company' sounds straight forward enough but, again, *OED*

> indicates early modern meanings that may be surprising and are certainly, I believe, significant: the word means '[a] body of persons combined or incorporated for some common object, or for the joint execution or performance of anything' (6.a) but *OED* adds that this is especially used for 'a mediaeval trade guild, and hence, a corporation historically representing such, as in the London 'City companies', so that this company might deliberately be conjuring up the members of the London guilds.[43]

It becomes apparent that the word 'mutinous' functions as a complex metaphor of social tension between order and disorder. The post-Armada era had in part marked a progressive change in the way early modern England used the word 'mutinous', though the first modern mutiny in England would only take place during the English revolution, led by the revolutionary forces, not the army of the Stuart state.[44] Earlier in the sixteenth century, 'mutinous' was a word used about 'persons' and 'their attributes' (*OED,* 1) to describe their frame of mind or natural inclinations. The 'mutinous' were in essence 'given to mutiny' and by definition 'rebellious' (*OED,* 1). 'Mutinous' was, in a large measure, a humour. Like the 'barbarous, rude, and unlearned' times they lived in, the 'mutinous' were those 'subject to tumults, seditions, and changes'.[45] The sixteenth century had regularly associated a mutinous humour with stubbornness, quarrelsomeness and sedition. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Sir Francis Bacon argued that, beyond nature, 'ignorance' was what made the minds of men 'churlish, thwart, and mutinous'.[46] It is in this sense for instance that Martius understands the trope; to ignorance he adds cowardice. He disparagingly addresses the citizens as 'Worshipful

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[43] Peter Holland, '"A Place Calling Itself Rome": *Coriolanus* and the City', in *Le poète et la cité,* p. 104.

[44] Neil Davidson, 'A History of Mutiny', *Socialist Review* 297 (June 2005), p. 8, in which he explains how the absolutists disapproved of the training and recruiting of their own subjects: 'Soldiers therefore tended to be mercenaries, preferably from outside the regal domains altogether – as in the role played by Swiss mercenaries for the French monarchy – but certainly from outside the areas where war was being waged. For this reason there were very few mutinies in early modern Europe. During the first successful bourgeois revolution, the Dutch Revolt against Hapsburg Spain (1567-1609), 'Spanish' troops mutinied, but over their pay and conditions, and not from any sympathy with their opponents or desire to overthrow the dynasty.'

[45] Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. with an Introduction by G.W. Kitchin (New York: Dutton, 1965), 1.2.§8, p. 14.

[46] Bacon, *op. cit*., 1.2.§8, p. 14.

mutineers' (I.i.248),[47] as they leave the stage when the conversation turns to the matters of war. He repeatedly denounces their inability to stand up and fight for their country. That they should not qualify in his eyes as valid representatives of the collective citizen-body call to mind Pierre Vidal-Naquet's portrayal of the chorus in Aeschylus's theatre, as a group no more qualified to embody the city in battle than the city at peace.[48] In the play, 'mutinous', as well as 'mutiny', 'mutinies' and 'mutineers' all apply to the discontented often riotous crowd — the citizens (I.i.SD1), the people (I.ii.11), the body politics' parts (I.i.108) and members (I.i.146).

Yet at the turn of the century, 'mutinous' also began to designate specifically the *provenance* of the disorder, that which was 'of the nature of or proceeding from mutiny' (*OED,* 2); that is, proceeding from a 'constituted revolt' on behalf of a 'disciplined body, especially military or naval' (*OED,* 'mutiny', obs.1.2). The word 'mutiny', which first and foremost signified an 'open revolt against constituted authority' (*OED,* 1), was already being used in the 1580s 'in a particularized sense' to mean 'a rebellion of a considerable number of soldiers, sailors, or other persons in subordinate position, against those in authority over them' (*OED*, 1.b). The 'mutinous', disorganized mob of old was proving to be a disciplined body and a collective agent whose object of insurgency was an established authority. It is perhaps at this stage that the word 'mutinous' contributes most to the complex elaboration of the citizens' fictive identity as collective *other*ness — being 'other' in that it stands 'in opposition to'. Indeed, it exacerbates

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[47] On the ambiguity of the stage action and the address, see Lee Bliss in her New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Coriolanus* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2000), p.118-119, note 234 to *Worshipful mutineers*: 'The mocking use of an honorific title of address aptly introduces Martius's comment on their bravery; they have presumably done something to attract his attention, perhaps shuffling nervously. Globe, followed by some editors, moves part of F's SF at 235 (*Citizens steal away*) to follow "garners", so that Martius's scornful remark on the citizens' valour is addressed to their retreating backs. "Pray follow" in this case would be addressed to the senators only. The emendation is attractive, yet it would also make Martius violate decorum by ordering the senators to follow him. Martius's comment that the citizens' "valour puts well fourth", addressed to their faces, would sarcastically comment on their late rebellion against the patricians, and "Pray follow" would invite them to prove truly valiant by joining the senators and chief soldiers at the Capitol to learn more about the coming war. There is ambiguity of stage action and address here, but F seems likely to be correct, and the citizens quietly disperse as Martius and the patricians turn away to exit'.

[48] Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'Eschyle, le passé et le présent' in *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne - II* (Paris: La découverte, 2001), p. 99: 'le chœur n'est pas qualifié pour incarner la cité combattante ou pacifique'.

the ambivalent nature of the chorus, as both a rowdy, disorderly crowd of civilians up in arms, and a group of organized, military men. Additionally, the word's operative resonances, which vary between the civilian and the military, make it hard for us to dismiss its naval implications. As such, the word brings to mind two Attic tragedies: Sophocles' *Ajax* and his *Philoctetes*, where the choruses, quite exceptionally, are made up of a body of armed sailors. According to John Gould,

> the choruses of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* are indeed composed of adult males, 'of the city' perhaps, but in both cases they are the sailors who crew the hero's ship and in both they are utterly dependent on the hero and his status, to the extent that in *Ajax* the chorus, helplessly despairing in the face of the hero's loss of honour, are reduced almost to ecstatic incoherence by their momentary and mistaken hope that after all Ajax has escaped the consequences of his mad attack on the Greek heroes, while in *Philoctetes* the chorus show themselves at the outset incapable of acting without the hero's instruction and continue bound to him in dependence throughout the action.[49]

The difficulty being that the '*mutinous*' in *Coriolanus* are not military men, but the '*citizens*'. As Peter Holland remarks, 'though the word meant "A member of the state, an enfranchised inhabitant of a country" (*OED,* 2), it also suggested "A civilian as distinguished from a soldier…" (*OED,* 1.d.)'.[50] This distinction matters when considering the choric role these citizens may be attributed. Again, in 'Eschyle, le passé et le présent', Vidal-Naquet stresses the fact that the chorus cannot properly be associated with the people, especially not people in arms.[51] In 'Œdipe à Athènes', he adds that the chorus was seldom made up of middle-of-the-road adult citizens, that is, city men old enough to go to battle.[52] Yet that is precisely what the opening stage direction presents us with: the common people and an armed crowd. Further in the play, the citizens are equated with those cowardly men on the battlefield in Coriolanus's severe comment: 'Being i'th' war, / Their mutinies and revolts, wherein they showed / Most valour, spoke not for them'

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[49] Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

[50] Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[51] Vidal-Naquet, *op.cit.*, p. 99 : 'le chœur n'est pas le peuple, et notamment pas le peuple en arme'.

[52] Vidal-Naquet, 'Œdipe à Athènes' in *op. cit.*, p. 159 : 'si le chœur est l'organe et l'expression collective et civique, il est tout à fait exceptionnel qu'il soit composé de ceux qui étaient les citoyens moyens, c'est-à-dire les adultes mâles en âge de combattre'.

(III.i.127-29). What is noteworthy is the migrating identity of the choric group from the citizens of Rome to a group of military men. The play already anticipates the group of soldiers we will encounter in Act I, scene v.

If we pursue the comparison between the choruses of these two Greek tragedies and the soldiers in Shakespeare's tragedy, we find that their relationship to *Coriolanus* works point by point in precisely the reverse mode to that encountered in Sophocles' plays. It is as if an irreverent inversion of the usual choric formula was taking place:

> FIRST SOLDIER. Foolhardiness not I.
> SECOND SOLDIER. Nor I.
> [...]
> FIRST SOLDIER. See, they have shut him in.
> SECOND SOLDIER. To th' pot, I warrant him. (I.v.17-20)

In what might appear as a studied twist of choric identity, the choric function of soldiers in *Coriolanus* operates exactly *a contrario* to that in *Ajax* or *Philoctetes*: they express no hint of despair and do not feel in any way bound up with the fate of the hero, quite the contrary; what transpires from their lines is a sense of detachment rather than dependence; they run no risk of fearing for the hero's loss of honour; rather, they express contempt for his 'foolhardiness' in risking his own life. As the gates of Corioles shut the hero within the city, leaving him alone to battle with the enemy, their pithy running commentaries express no ecstatic incoherence but simply an unheroic, collective refusal to follow Martius into battle, in an awkward rhyming scheme ('him in' / 'him') and a clumsy repetition — 'Not I' / 'Nor I'.

The play's opening scene reveals the complexity of a choric entity, its main characteristic being its equivocal nature and elusive role. The ambivalent fictive identity of the chorus seems to be intricately embedded in the text. The choric group does not belong to one specific place in society but shifts from citizenship to the military, from an organised urban demonstration armed with legal phraseologies to a riotous, rural-like mob armed with staves and clubs. This displacement in identity continues as we observe a set of adult male-citizens turn into a set of effeminate, puerile prattlers, a mutation in attributes that would suggest that the choric role escapes all rigid forms of embodiment.

Instead of fulfilling the promise of action, and delivering a performance of stage rioting, as might have been expected following the initial stage direction, the citizens call everything to a halt. They only proceed to reopening a debate. Very quickly, the focus shifts from action to eloquence, from eloquence to foolish chatter: 'FIRST CITIZEN. Before we proceed any further, hear me speak. / ALL. Speak, speak' (I.i.1-3). And further: 'ALL. No more talking on't, let it be done. Away. Away. / SECOND CITIZEN. One word, good citizens' (I.i.12-13). And again: 'speak not maliciously' (I.i.32); 'I say unto you' (I.i.33); 'men can be content to say' (I.i.35); 'You must not say' (I.i.39). The procrastination reaches a stage both frustrating for the citizens and farcical for the spectators. Ironically, the most loquacious of the lot, the first citizen, hears a sound of 'shouts within' and exclaims: 'Why stay we prating here? To th' Capitol!' (I.i.1-45). As we might have guessed by now, this latest attempt to act also miscarries.

The choric group of men have become locked in repetition and pointless talk. R.B. Parker comments: 'Perhaps the chief characteristic of Rome's style is its argumentativeness – in the sense of noisy contention, rather than Enright's more mannerly term, "debate"'.[53] Their subsequent quarrel with Menenius only adds to the choric deadlock as he joins in. The Captain in *Twelfth Night* would argue: 'What great ones do, the less will prattle of' (I.ii.33).[54] Their exchanges boil down to what Iago in *Othello* would disdainfully qualify as 'mere prattle without practice' (I.i.26).[55] There is no eloquence in words that lead nowhere.

Because of their infantile squabbles and chatter, the plebeians, supposedly representative of the male citizen body, shift symbolically and join the ranks of the socially marginal, like the gossip Valeria (I.iii) and the 'prattling nurse' (II.i.203). In fact, their collective voice recalls a more classical form of chorus, made up of a liminal community – feminine divinities, women (sometimes slaves themselves) and old

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53 Parker, *op.cit.*, p. 72. Quotes D.J. Enright, '*Coriolanus*: Tragedy or Debate?', *Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954), p. 1-19.

54 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik, Arden Shakespeare, second series (London & New York: Routledge, 1975).

55 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. M.R. Ridley, Arden Shakespeare, second series (London & New York: Routledge, 1959).

men[56] – whose reeking breaths (III.iii.122) prove far weaker still than the choric breath of the embassies, which the first watchman derides: 'Can you [...] think to front his revenges with the easy groans of old women, the virginal palms of your daughters, or with the palsied intercession of such decayed dotant as you seem to be?' (V.ii.39-45). We note how, at various points in the play, the authority of collective wisdom runs the risk of losing all credit and being excluded from the tragic action altogether.

There is, however, one set of characters, the tribunes, that does not dismiss the potential power of the choric persona and its generic variation, but instrumentalizes it for its own ends. In Act III, scene iii, Sicinius introduces his plebeian assistant, Aedile, to the art of choric rhetoric, in order to sway the crowds against Coriolanus. All choral lyricism and ritual are utterly demystified:

> Assemble presently the people hither,
> And when they hear me say 'It shall be so
> I'th' right and strength o'th' commons', be it either
> For death, for fine, or banishment, then let them,
> If I say 'Fine', cry 'Fine!', if 'Death', cry 'Death!'
> Insisting on the old prerogative
> And power i'th' truth o'th' cause. (III.iii.12-18)

In order to root the chorus in a civic frame and a sense of righteousness, Sicinius would have Aedile 'insist' on the people's 'old prerogative' to approve laws. Despite the linguistic register of custom and law, Sicinius manages the crowd not as their representative spokesman but as a ringleader. There is no morality in the way he takes on the role of the *chorypheus* or in the way he exploits the plebeians' 'legal antiquarianism', a phrase Parker borrows from Christopher Hill to qualify the rhetorical grounding of 'the play's pervasive legal terminology and the Tribunes' constant appeals to custom and traditional right'.[57] He toys with the plebeians' readiness to fall into a choric mode; but when the timing is wrong, Sicinius reels back their impetus and forcefully tames them into silence:

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[56] Vidal-Naquet, *op.cit.*, p. 99: '... Composé de déesses (*Prométhée*), de Furies (les *Euménides*), de femmes, voire de captives (les *Sept*, les *Suppliantes*, les *Choéphores*), de vieillards (les *Perses*, *Agamemnon*)...'.

[57] Parker, *op.cit.,* 41.

> SICINIUS. Mark you this, people?
> ALL [THE CITIZENS]. To th'rock, to th' rock with him!
> SICINIUS. Peace! (III.iii.75-77)

The cue to the choric outburst of shouts is finally given. Picking up on the citizens' choric call for death, the tribunes make out that they are saving Coriolanus from his fate of doom:

> In peril of precipitation
> From off the rock Tarpeian, never more
> To enter our Rome gates. I'th' people's name
> I say it shall be so.
> ALL [THE CITIZENS]
> It shall be so, it shall be so! Let him away!
> He's banished, and it shall be so! (III.iii.107-8)

The choric refrain is repeated once more in order to silence Cominius: 'BRUTUS. It shall be so! / ALL [THE CITIZENS]. It shall be so, it shall be so!' (III.iii.119-20). All argument has by now been drowned in an echo of words from the *vox populi*. What we retain as we watch the dynamics of the individual and the collective unfold is the repugnant means by which the tribunes manipulate the people as well as the authoritative self-repositioning of the collective on stage, thanks to the tribunes. Richard Marienstras notes Shakespeare's ambivalent treatment of the collective voice, which in this scene reaches its paroxysm, after which it will grow weak and dissipate:

> [Shakespeare] est plus sévère encore avec les tribuns, indiquant la bassesse de leurs mobiles et leur machiavélisme, non sans donner à entendre que leur cause est juste, que leur accès au tribunat est le commencement d'une nouvelle et grande page politique pour la cité. [...] On aura remarqué la force et, conjointement, la faiblesse de la *vox populi* dans la pièce. Capable de faire exiler Coriolan, elle s'amenuise lamentablement lorsqu'il revient à Rome à la tête de l'armée volsque.[58]

III

The audience is not invited to resolve this ambivalence. Indeed, the choric utterances of the play are infused with inner contradictions. *In fine*, no clear vision is reached, either by the characters or by the audience; 'judgement is baffled', argues G. R. Hibbard:

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[58] Marienstras, *op.cit.*, p. 1555 and 1560.

> One of the most marked features of *Coriolanus* is the large number of choric scenes in it. Time after time two people, or two groups of people, come together to discuss Coriolanus's behaviour and character, and on each occasion the pattern of the discussion is the same. Two antithetical views of him are put forward and left unreconciled. Even when this choric function is transferred to a single person, Aufidius, in IV.7, no final conclusion is arrived at. In the last analysis there is something mysterious about him; judgement is baffled. Men are either for him or against him, they cannot regard him with detachment or indifference.[59]

Hibbard is amongst the few critics to have considered the dynamics of the choric function in the play. Significantly, he does not assign the role of the chorus to a fixed set of characters and he considers the possibility of the role being transferred to a single character. He identifies a dynamics of alterity that motivates these choric utterances, each led by two parties that exchange opposing views on the hero. Most significantly, these exchanges always end on an a*poria* — in the opening scene, each citizen believes that the other is involved in a process of failing interpretation, and both challenge the other with competing visions of their hero and of events that could be valid or invalidating.

This is not simply an illustration of the elusive and ambivalent structure of choric entities in *Coriolanus*. This very bafflement lies at the very core of the choric group's dramatic identity and ensures the design of tragic meaning as a whole, because it is these groups that contribute to making the audience share in the uneasy and unresolved sense of direction and meaning — a sense of collective alienation or 'otherness'. As John Gould explains, the chorus is, after all, not a tragic agent. 'It is rather the locus of an unresolvable tension between intense emotional involvement in, and exclusion from, tragic action: the chorus are both the prisoners and the passionately engaged witnesses of tragic experience.'[60] The choric prating of the citizens (I.i) gains new resonance if interpreted as 'the strife of warring words', to use a Euripidean phrase,[61] and sheds possible light on the tragedy's return to the intractable. The play refers us inevitably to the myth of Coriolanus's

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[59] Hibbard, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

[60] Gould, *op.cit.,* p. 221.

[61] On the *Oresteia*, see Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1986), p. 55: 'The "strife of warring words" has no neutrals. I have already quoted Vernant's remark that "the tragic message... is precisely that there are zones of opacity and incommunicability in the words men exchange". This message applies to the reading and understanding of the words of the tragedy itself.'

'too absolute' nature in counterbalance to the reality of the too-easily manipulated crowd. In this last section, I would like to see how the private sphere of the hero in isolation is bound up with construction of the public expression of collective otherness.

We first need to return to Act I, scene v, where, despite the outdoor setting, the battle scene in which Martius takes on the city of Corioles in single-handed combat is played out behind closed walls. Both the stage direction 'Martius is shut in' (SD I.v.18) and the first soldier's running commentary 'See, they have shut him in' (I.v.19) temporarily bolt Martius within a contained space and away from the spectators' gaze, thus taking a firm clamp on the audience's imagination.[62] This is a 'scene within a scene' made to screen the hero from our eyes at the height of the action. What happens next remains visually out-of-bounds. Martius is left quite alone in action and feeling to construct his own myth and persona. The only display we gain access to is the outcome of this concealed action: the tableau of the bloody protagonist who re-enters the stage — alive!

As if this tragic device was not enough, the first soldier's terse statement: 'he is himself alone / To answer all the city' (I.v.23-24) weighs heavily upon the audience's collective mind and conscience. It would seem that when the play places its hero within the city, it is to let him face the music 'alone' in the face of 'all'. The first soldier's remark is characterized by the operational opposition between these two words, which provides a study in contrast, by drawing the pattern of things to come between Coriolanus, the city and 'all' the others (including the spectators). In fact, this polarization between the man *alone* and *all* the city works its way through the play like a choric refrain. This refrain is progressively taken up by a succession of characters, even by the protagonist himself, and is compulsively performed up to the point when the tension and anxiety that it had managed to contain so far ultimately gathers momentum in the exit scene.

In the following Act, Volumnia's 'eerily incantatory lines' (II.i.154-57), which 'give public expression to a very personal myth',[63]

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[62] The description of the city mainly lies in the evocation of the swift opening and forceful shutting of the city gates, as in, for instance, lines 14: 'now the gates are ope', and 24: 'upon a sudden / Clapp'd-to their gates'.

[63] Parker, *op.cit.,* p.71. See note 10.

anticipate the choric heralding of Martius's return to Rome: 'Know, Rome, that alone Martius did fight / Within Corioles' gates' (II.i.158-59). As if anonymity called for anonymity, the response to Herald's annunciation is assigned the speech prefix 'ALL'. The line plays 'an obvious choric or ritual function'[64] as the Herald's line is literally reiterated in ceremonial and near-to devotional fashion: 'Welcome to Rome, renownèd Coriolanus' (II.i.163). 'Herald' and 'All' form a choric group that accompanies the processional advance of the tragic hero, whose fate and the people's seemed intricately bound up: 'Death, that dark spirit, in's nervy arm doth lie, / Which being advanced, declines; and then men die'. (II.i.156-57). Here, as throughout this myth-making process, the tone is commemorative. In Act I, scene v, Lartius was already pronouncing a eulogy, even before the mythical episode was over — Martius had yet to appear, 'a thing of blood', outside Corioles' city-walls.

Then it falls to Cominius to take on this choric function and recall how 'Alone he entered / The mortal gate of th' city' (II.ii.108-109). Cominius addresses the refrain not to 'ALL' but specifically to the Senators of Rome at the Capitol, thus revealing that the choric function is neither the prerogative of a group of characters nor that of a single and anonymous speech prefix. Once again, the addressee of the choric utterance is on a par with the character pronouncing the refrain and the personal and public spheres combine to construction a choric persona.

Most remarkably, perhaps: it is the protagonist who first picks up on the choric refrain that will progressively turn both the character and his deed to myth; he is also the last to give it utterance. Martius commits to memory the episode that earned him the title of Coriolanus, not three hours after the event, by reminding his arch-adversary, Aufidius, that 'Alone I fought in your Corioles' walls' (I.ix.8). The highly personalized and pronominal clash between 'I' and 'you(r)' – again speaker and addressee are on a par – emphasises the contrast between the singular and the communal. Again, we find a dual structure so typical of a choric entity. In the final scene of the play, moments before his assassination, Coriolanus harks back to the episode that has, by this time, gone down in history. The lines, yet again, are addressed to his rival:

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64 Honigmann, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

> If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
> That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I
> Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles.
> Alone I did it, boy! (V.vi.114-17)

This commemorative voice recalls the episode when Coriolanus speaks to his boy, reminding him of old heroic values (V.iii.70-75). The ceremonial portrayal of the hero 'alone' receives one of its most glorious statements when a jubilant Martius cries 'O, me *alone*!' (I.vii.77), a line spoken in response to the preceding stage direction: 'They *all* shout and wave their swords, take him up in their arms and cast up their caps' (SD I.vii.76).[65] The outburst looks back to an archaic use of the word 'alone', 'often strengthened by a pronoun prefixed, *me al-one* (or *al me one*)' (OED, 3), and brings to light the ambiguous implications of the compound word; far from operating solely in opposition to 'all', 'alone' grounds its etymological meaning within the adverb expressing wholeness and communion.

It might be argued that the choric function in the play is carried through 'the cumulative repetition of certain effects and experiences', which are, for the most part, 'related to the endeavour of the city community to contain its own hero'.[66] Alternatively, that it should fall to the hero to take on the choric function and embody collective otherness, around the rallying word, however self-referential — ' alone' / all for one (a dynamic movement ultimately taking on all by himself even if that means sacrificing everything to oneself) — reveals to what extent this expression of singularity also secures a sense of community, of communion even, between the hero and his observers. Such a communion may be expressed through applause and acclamations; it may also take the form of mammocking.

R.B. Parker finds in Elias Canetti's study Crowds and Power a possible explanation for Coriolanus's 'sense of unique "aloneness"'; its key would lie in a sense of power gained from surviving an ordeal: 'the essence of the situation is that he feels unique'.[67] Yet this sense of uniqueness also corresponds to a dynamics; and such dynamics, Elias Canetti argues, may be shared or transferred from the hero to the crowd: 'The tendency of all human crowds to become more and more

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[65] The italics are mine.
[66] Brockbank, *op.cit.*, p. 52 and note 1. Reuben A.Brower, *Hero and Saint, Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Tradition* (1971), p. 378.
[67] Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

— the blind, reckless, dynamic movement which sacrifices everything to itself and which is always present in a gathering crowd — this tendency is *transferable*. Hunters transfer it to their prey...'[68] The dark spirit that inhabited the ruthless warrior and the sense of uniqueness that he felt with every battle in which he escapes death, is ultimately transferred to the Volscians. Brockbank analyses the dynamics of transfer remarkably:

> Shakespeare does not allow us to forget that the outrage upon the Volscian cities is avenged by those who first split the air with noise (V.vi.52) to welcome Martius' return; and the shout which finally fills the theatre, 'Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!', has no clear retributive focus, it is a war-cry and the cry of the hunter. The killers, as in Rome, cry havoc where they 'should but hunt / With modest warrant' (III.i.272-3) and their 'tiger-footed rage' finds the 'harm of unscann'd swiftness' (III.i.309-10).[69]

The violence breaks out as Coriolanus wishes to find himself alone in combat against Aufidius and his entire lineage. On hearing this, 'ALL THE PEOPLE' 'tear him to pieces' (V.vi.121) in a choric, clamorous repetition of the verb 'kill, kill'; editors refer the repetition to Cotgrave, 'à mort, à mort', the cry of bloody soldiers pursuing their fearful enemies to death'. Aufidius and his people respond to his final words, 'to use my lawful sword', with brutality. The vociferous crowd attacks the man it held in awe — 'their god' — as his remoteness and haughty pride are brought down in a moment's cry: 'insolent villain' (V.vi.130). With this intensely emotional cry of indignation, the head of the tribe informs his men that Coriolanus is no longer thought worthy of the law. His line releases a rage within the crowd, a rage he claims 'provoked' (V.vi.137) by Coriolanus, and thus becomes the driving motion of the whole community. The crowd enact Aufidius's response to Coriolanus's defiance by applying lynch law, or the negation of law. Remarkably, as the trigger to this event, the protagonist still partakes in the choric function and secures, in communion with all the other characters, tragic unity and meaning.

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[68] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (London: Penguin, 1992), p.231.
[69] Brockbank, *op.cit*, p. 65.

Coriolanus is faced with much more than the 'incantatory manifestation of the people's malevolent power'. In fact, we have discovered that, up to the end, the choric persona in *Coriolanus* continues to remain refractory to any attempt to provide an exemplary model. This study of the construction of collective otherness in *Coriolanus* reveals that there is no single choric function in *Coriolanus* and that the choric persona takes on no single form; the protean elusiveness, mutability and unstable identity of the chorus are what enable the choric function to be passed on from one (set of) character(s) to the next. It has led us to stress the experimental nature of Shakespeare's final tragedy, which invests the classical choric function with an unpredictable logic. If any characteristic were to be found, it would consist in the continuous indeterminacy that warrants the repeated metamorphosis of the choric group and secures the dynamics of tragedy.

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